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War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning

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BOOK REVIEWS

SUCH IS WAR'S EFFECT

Hedges, Chris. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2002. 211pp. \$23

Chris Hedges's timely and moving reflection *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* is about how war destroys the people who experience it. He eloquently argues throughout his short book that no one who is caught up in war ever emerges unscathed or unscarred. Hedges wants the reader to see war for what it is—an evil designed by humans to empower great violence against other humans. Hedges depicts this evil graphically, many times and in many ways, throughout the book. He feels compelled to make his case in extremely stark terms because he knows that for all its wickedness, war is also a most addictive psychological and social drug. Worse, Hedges states, war is sometimes a necessary evil, a poison that civilized and humane peoples must take to defeat horribly deformed nations and peoples who have completely surrendered their humanity to it.

Hedges knows of what he writes. For over fifteen years, he covered wars for various news agencies. He was one of those reporters who, like Ernie Pyle of a generation past, travel to the front to get their stories. Hedges got something else, for which he had not bargained—

an addiction to the “jag” of combat. Michael Herr, a reporter during the Vietnam War, summarized this addiction: “[Under fire] maybe you couldn't love the war and hate it inside the same instant, but sometimes those feelings alternated so rapidly that they spun together in a strobic wheel rolling all the way up until you were literally High On War like it said on all the helmet covers. Coming off a jag like that could really make a mess out of you.”

As a “cure” for his addiction, Hedges spent a year in self-reflection and study at Harvard; the result is this book. He argues that war is so attractive because it provides meaning and purpose to our lives and fills a void in our existence. The Faustian bargain is that war also demands sacrifice—the destruction of everything and everyone who is important to the combatants, including the culture in which they live.

Hedges would have the reader believe that war really expresses the Freudian notion of Thanatos, or death wish—that humans find meaning in their lives through their self-sacrifice, through dying. One immediately thinks of the suicide bombers in

Israel or the hijackers of “9/11.” However, he argues further that if Freud is correct, the balance to Thanatos is Eros, or the love of life. While Thanatos drives humans to self-annihilation, Eros drives them to embrace each other with affection and support. The Freudian view is that both concepts are real and in eternal struggle; there can never be a lasting peace between them.

Hedges closes with a plea: “To survive as a human being is possible only through love. And when Thanatos is ascendant, the instinct must be to reach out to those we love, to see them all in their divinity, pity and pathos of the human.” Love alone, for the author, has the ability to overcome human destructiveness. One feels almost compelled to regurgitate the Beatles line, “All you need is love.” Therein lies the serious weakness of this book. Hedges is convincing in his analysis and reflection on war but superficial to the point of triviality about its necessary counterbalance, love. It is as if he remains addicted to the very thing that he recognizes will destroy him.

Nevertheless, every civilian defense executive, soldier, sailor, Marine, and airman should read *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. Those of us who have known the intimate jag of war also know its nightmares. Hedges’s work is a cautionary tale implying that nations and peoples should enter war most reluctantly. It warns that war should be a last resort, and that tragic consequences may result even so.

My father made four opposed landings with MacArthur’s army in the Southwest Pacific theater, each one with the first assault wave. He was never wounded. After the war, he worked for

an aerospace company for over forty years and never missed a day to sickness. Every night, after work, he drank himself insensate. That is my most salient memory of him. Now, after *my* war, I know that his drinking was a learned coping behavior that served him well after each landing. It also got him through the rest of his life. Such is war’s effect.

With this book Hedges has rammed the issue of morality and ethics of war in our faces. Will we take heed, or simply strike?

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Henriksen, Thomas H., ed. *Foreign Policy for America in the Twenty-first Century: Alternative Perspectives*. Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2001. 152pp. \$15

A brief, clean-cutting compendium with six well known scholarly contributors, Henriksen’s volume illuminates the current cardinal directions in the debate over American foreign policy—unilateral versus multilateral interventionism along one axis, and aggressive promotion of democracy (or global markets) versus conservative harboring of national strength on the other. Behind this compass hides the more theoretical discussion of whether the United States needs or could possibly maintain a grand strategy in the absence of an immediate national security threat. Henriksen’s own contribution (introduction and chapter 5) is to lay out the dynamics of the post-Cold War world, emphasizing the rise of China, threats from rogue states, a stumbling Russia, and a series of regional crises that